

Cabinet Agenda

Monday, 16 February 2015 at 6.00 pm

Town Hall, Queen's Square, Priory Meadow, Hastings TN34 1QR

For further information, please contact Michael Courts on 01424 451764 or email mcourts@hastings.gov.uk

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Consultation responses received after the publication of Cabinet papers

Email

Comments: Three further e mail responses were received with regards to the potential closure of the Old Town Museum. The following points of concern were raised:

- Potential loss of the Old Town Museum as an educational resource deemed part of the unique atmosphere and character of the Old Town.
- Fear that the building may stand empty or become simply another club, café or shop.
- That HBC have manufactured the reduction in footfall to the Old Town Museum by taking away its tourist information role.
- That should such a closure result in staff redundancies that there will be a knock on affect in paying housing benefit and council tax relief.
- Maintenance costs of a 'listed' possibly empty building should a closure go ahead.
- Costs of moving collections and other museums activity should staff be made redundant or temporary staff employed to facilitate a potential closure.
- Desire for 'Tourism' in the draft corporate plan is at odds with (a) 'cutting the Marketing and Communications team to the bone so that it cannot do its job properly' and (b) situating the main offer for tourist information in Aquila House when visitors 'come to see the Old Town.'

Response: Comments noted.

Museums Association

Councillors Birch, Poole and the Head of Amenities, Resorts and Leisure met with members from the Museums committee after the publication of the draft corporate plan and budget papers. The following comments/questions were offered:

Comment: How are reserves used to support the budget setting process?

Response: The council earmarked the use of reserves for specific projects; a general reserve is also maintained to cover unforeseen circumstances but a Transition Reserve has been set up and monies will be taken from there to support the 2015/16 and the 2016/17 budgets as planned.

Comment: Regret expressed that the Old Town Museum will be potentially closed for the 950th cultural celebrations.

Response: It would be more effective to concentrate the efforts of the small team that manage the Museum service at the John's Place site. There would also be a financial cost associated with keeping the Old Town Hall Museum open in 2016.

Question: Could funds be reallocated from elsewhere in the council's regeneration budget to support the Old Town Hall Museum in 2016?

Response: The budget allocated by the council to support the celebrations to mark the 950th anniversary is intended to attract funding from grant providers and third parties. Positive discussions had taken place with the Heritage Lottery Fund regarding a potential bid to support a local history exhibition in 2016. Improvements to the John's Place Museum could also support the council's longer term ambition to develop the visitor experience at Hastings Castle.

Comment: Concern about how soon the local history display could be made available for public viewing should the Old Town Museum close.

Response: The Curator is provisionally considering suitable locations to display the exhibits at John's Place should the Old Town Museum close. Plans will not be firmed up until after the Budget Council on the 25th of February.

Comment: Concern over potential dispersal of the Old Town Museum collection.

Response: Currently there are no plans to disperse the collection. The Museums Committee would continue to have oversight of the management of the collection.

Comment: View was expressed that HBC retain the freehold for the Old Town Museum should the decision be made to close it.

Response: All options for the disposal of the building would be considered, and the availability of the building would be advertised at the appropriate time.

Comment: That the council consider maximising revenue for the Museums' service by developing income from educational provision.

Response: Suggestions noted.

Following this meeting representatives from the Museums Association submitted a full written response to Councillor Birch on the 9th February. The key points are set out verbatim below:

1. We would prefer the Old Town Hall Museum of Local History to remain open as an important resource of education and interest to inhabitants of the Borough and visitors. Surely £34,000 could be found from another budget to keep it open (regeneration perhaps). The Old Town Hall Museum is part of our cultural heritage and it's interaction with The Fisherman's Museum, Shipwreck Heritage and the Museum and Art Gallery at John's Place is part of the unique mix (not forgetting Burton St. Leonards) of historical interest that is the envy of other sea-side resorts such as Bexhill-on-Sea and Eastbourne.
2. If money cannot be found to keep this Museum of Early Local History open in the setting of what is now considered Hastings Old Town and where William waited to hear news of Harold's advance south and the motion to close it is agreed by the Full Council then ALL the artefacts MUST come back to the Museum and Art Gallery at John' Place for re-display and NO QUESTION of their dispersal. A photographic record has been taken of the collections and

the curatorial team has already given some thought to its incorporation within the present galleries.

3. We do not, under any circumstances, wish the Old Town Hall to be sold. We would suggest a Full Repairing Lease at current property valuation is offered for 15 years with the option of another 5 and the Freehold remaining with the Borough. This would produce revenue for the Borough and we would hope that a portion of it would be ring-fenced for the Museum Service.
4. We feel strongly that there is a total lack of publicity of the educational value and use of all our collections.

Seniors Forum

Councillor Birch met with representatives from the Seniors Forum on the 12th of February. The following comments/questions were raised:

Question: How much income do we expect to receive as a result of a 5 % increase in car parking charges?

Response: The proposed 5% increase if approved will mean there will be no further increase until 2017. We would be looking to collect in the region of 50k from our mainstream carparks and 50k for the Foreshore Trust. Generally our parking charges are still competitive compared to the surrounding areas and we are planning to increase opportunities to allow customers to pay by card and phone.

Question: How do we manage the coinage associated with parking income?

Response: HBC has commissioned a new cash collector through the East Sussex procurement hub as it is much cheaper and more efficient than doing this in house. Currently the majority of people continue to pay by cash.

Question: What is the position with regards to the HBC role that supports the Seniors and the Youth Council?

Response: The council will continue to support the Seniors and the Youth Council but this role will involve a wider remit supporting other community groups. On this basis community groups will need to become more self-sufficient and manage their own affairs where possible.

Question: What financial support can the council provide, particularly in terms of supporting the cost of the Senior's Forum office, shared with Hope G and the Pensioners Association?

Response: Given that there will be potential capacity reduction in terms of officer time given to the Seniors Forum, the council will look into supporting rental costs.

Comment: Concern with accessing council services online particularly if you don't have a computer or other accessible device.

Response: When Universal Credit is introduced from April it is expected that everyone will access this online. The council is keen to make more services online as it is cheaper for us to do so if people can self-serve and residents now expect to access services online, as they may do so to book a flight, pay for a TV licence etc.

Question: What if we can't use online methods, will the council help?

Response: If residents are struggling, they can get support at the Town Hall Customer Contact Centre where staff will be able to support and enable resident's access services online.

Question: What has been done in the way of testing online access and can Seniors be involved in testing new approaches?

Response: Work on better online access of council services is underway and the council would very much welcome the input of Seniors and other community groups when we are in a position to start beta testing new approaches.

Question: Why are there plans to close the Old Town Museum?

Response: It is planned to close the Old Town Museum given the broader financial challenges the council faces in terms of government grant reductions of over 50% since 2010. Should the decision be reached to close the Old Town Museum by council on the 25th of February, associated display artefacts will be retained with a view to locating these at St Johns Place.

Question: Will that potentially leave the Old Town Museum empty?

Response: The Museum Association has already suggested that it would like HBC to retain the freehold and potentially lease the building. We are confident the building will not be empty and we will have full discussions on the future use of the building subject to the decision taken by council on the 25th of February.

Question: How does the council support the White Rock Theatre (WRT)?

Response: The council is in a ten year contract with HQ theatres to run the WRT. The council will need to consider options for the Theatre shortly as the contract nears completion. The WRT is the wrong size and if it were to be built again, it would not be build the same way. It is felt that recently HQ Theatres have improved the quality of performances and this is reflected in recent attendance figures.

The future use of the WRT will be considered as part of the council's intentions to plan development for the White Rock surrounding area. The council has set aside monies to plan the further revival and determine the best use of the White Rock area.

Question: What is in store for Bottle Alley?

Response: The council had recently received a petition from residents to restore Bottle Alley. Given that a full restoration funded by the council is unrealistic given the

financial climate, the council have agreed to make repairs and improvements that will include decorative lighting. The council is also exploring using the space to store and launch Kayaks with interested parties, as part of considering the potential for business use here.

Question: Where is the Hastings embroidery?

Response: It is currently in storage. Given the size of the embroidery it is challenging finding an appropriate space where it can be displayed.

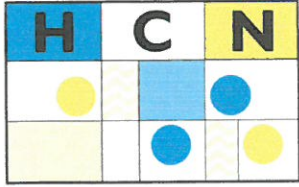
Question: Are there any updates on the town's shopping facilities?

Response: There are two new shops and a cafe due to open in Priory Meadow following a successful Christmas period. As HBC is the freeholder for Priory Meadow it is important that Priory Meadow keeps busy and attracts new business so that the council can maximise its share of rental income.

Question: Why is the Turner gallery in Margate free and the Jerwood isn't?

Response: The Turner gallery is publically funded by Kent County Council and the Arts Council. The Jerwood is a different entity and as a Trust is not publically funded. Hastings residents can access the Jerwood for free on the first Tuesday afternoon of every month and at a reduced rate for residents at any other time.

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Hastings Community Network

Hastings Community Network
c/o HVA
Jackson Hall
Portland Place
Hastings

12th February 2015

Dear Cllr Birch

HCN Budget Consultation

On behalf of the Hastings Community Network we would like to thank you for attending our recent meeting to discuss with HCN members the proposed budget and Corporate Plan. It was really useful to engage directly with this process and to provide a perspective from the Voluntary and Community Sector about the proposed changes and the challenging funding climate in which HBC are forced to operate. We thought it would be helpful to write as a follow up to summarise some of the issues we raised and have circulated this to your fellow elected members so that they can be aware of our submission to the Consultation. Our views are as follows:-

The Funding Settlement: The Network are deeply concerned, as you are, about the recent settlement and the way in which Hastings – as an area of specific and long term deprivation – is being treated compared to other more affluent geographical areas. We will be writing separately to Amber Rudd MP and appropriate Government Minister about this issue. We are deeply concerned about the long term impact of public service cuts and the funding formulae which has produced this result (and also the challenging issues relating to the Policing budget because of the issues relating to the ‘precept’ formulae). We are aware that the Council set this budget in a particularly challenging context and do not envy you the task of reconciling resources with essential services to residents. Nevertheless, we hope our detailed comments may be helpful to the Council in finalising the budget.

Digital by Default: We note the Councils wish to move towards a more digital approach as the first point of entry to accessing Council services. We appreciate that this is in line with

broader changes such as the growth on internet banking and it is clearly important that the Council embrace this. However, we are concerned that the Council identify early the significant issues of digital exclusion in the area and work proactively with the voluntary sector to address them. We believe that the availability of digital access in some areas, combined with the technical and other skills required to complete benefit applications for example remain significant issues. We believe that a systematic assessment of this will need to be undertaken to avoid the dangers of exclusion. Whilst we note the CPF contribution to the REACH project this, in itself, can only scratch the surface of what we believe to be a significant challenge for the Town. We would also welcome a review of the availability of public computers in HBC buildings, libraries and other locations and an analysis the capacity which will be required in the future to meet demand.

Private Rented Sector Housing: We welcome the proposal by the Council to consider a private rented licensing scheme and note the absence of statutory protection for private sector tenants which over the last 2 decades has significantly eroded. We believe that the scheme could positively drive up standards and produce a better quality experience for tenants. However we note that the financing of the start-up costs of the scheme have not been included as a growth items in the Revenue budget. We wish to see a scheme which is proactive and has “teeth” to regulate and tackle poor (and sometimes dangerous) conditions this will require resources to be carefully considered. Information from Brighton Housing Trust has suggested that the requirement for licenses needs to be continually enforced and without regular monitoring the scheme could fall into disrepute. There is some evidence of this with the current HMO licensing scheme Hastings has had since 2011. In the last six or so months BHT have successfully defended approx. 20 cases in the County Court with landlords who did not have HMO licences. Our concern is that the capacity issues within Housing Renewal may not be sufficient to manage a ‘meaningful’ scheme. We are concerned that without appropriate resources and ongoing monitoring the scheme could just turn into something where the decent landlords get the license and the not-so-decent landlords don’t bother as there are no consequences or follow up.

Social Lettings Agency: With regard to the Social Lettings Agency the network welcome any scheme that provides opportunities for families not to have to go into B&B or small temporary accommodation but we would wish to have further detail about how this will operate in practice. A number of similar schemes have operated in the voluntary sector and they have sometimes proved problematic to manage and administer effectively. Specifically there have been issues raised about how the rent of an estimated £167 for a 2 bed property will remain affordable if the tenant is to make the transition from benefit into work – and given that the current Local Housing Allowance is capped at £115 per week. Some careful

consideration will need to be given if the scheme is to enable tenants to remain in their property as their circumstances change particularly if they move into employment.

HBC Community Facing Officers: We understand that the Council is embarking on a restructuring process and it would not be appropriate to comment on different posts until this has been settled. However we would like to explore with HBC how the relationship between the Council and key community organisations and networks can best be continued into the future. Whilst we accept that the Council may not be able to be as “hands on” as in previous years we are concerned about the infrastructure available when this reduction in the Council’s staffing is seen alongside the reduction in funding for VCS Infrastructure provided by Hastings Voluntary Action. We would welcome a follow up meeting with the appropriate Corporate Director to discuss the thinking behind the restructure - and the implications of it - in more detail.

Disabled Facilities Grants: Members of Hastings Community Network work in the areas of Health and Social Care and have been part of the ESCC Better Together Consultation. We have been regularly briefed on the demographic changes of an older population – many of whom live with long term medical conditions and the challenge this poses for service providers. As a consequence we have good reason to believe that there will be more people with disabilities who will need aids, adaptations and care in order to remain in their home. In this context we note that the Council intend to freeze its Disabled Facilities Grant budget at current 2014/2015 levels. We would like to receive further information about the impact of this and the demand on that budget particularly as it is our belief that the Council are presently having to decline applications and are not able to make any discretionary allocations at all beyond the scope of the mandatory DFG scheme.

VCS Role in Service Delivery: We note that the VCS is not specifically referred to in the Corporate plan and believe that the role of the sector could and should be given greater prominence. It is our belief that with a reduction in public services, a ratcheting up of eligibility criteria combined with the introduction of a complex welfare reform agenda, VCS frontline services are under increased pressure to fill in the gaps. They are also actively engaged in improving access to funds and support. Together this creates particular challenges for VCS organisations and we believe it is strategically important that the current level of VCS investment (via the Community Partnerships Fund) should remain at least at its present levels. Therefore the Community Network oppose the proposed 6.9% reduction in voluntary sector funding contained in the budget and ask Councillors to restore the budget to at least its previous level of investment.

Greenway: Then Network support the inclusion of a specific reference to the Greenway project in the Corporate Plan as this long standing project addresses transport, health and mobility issues as well as creating a safe network for cyclists across the Town.

Seafront Strategy: Similarly we welcome the Council's attempts to create a specific strategy for the Seafront and increase footfall along a much longer area of the promenade. The recent announcement of a programme of works to restore and repair some of the worst affected areas such as Bottle Alley is a welcome investment which can both improve a decaying area and restore some of the ground-breaking work of Sydney Little in terms of municipal design.

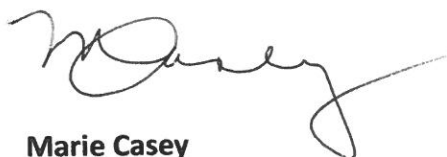
Affordability and Charges: We note that different departments have been asked to identify initiatives and measures which can mitigate the funding pressures HBC face. These have been achieved via a mixture of service cuts and fee increases. Within various parts of the budget and its appendices various fee increases are proposed. However the level of such increases has some quite wide variations. In some cases (such as the rental of chalets) proposed increases are minimal or in line with inflation but in other areas (such as the proposed increase to the Garden refuse collection service) the % increases is much higher. We invite the Council to take a corporate view where any increases are considered and review this so that there is greater consistency.

We hope that our response to the Council is a helpful contribution to the debate as Councillors consider the final budget setting phase of the process. Once again thank you for attending our meeting.

Yours Sincerely



Jacky Everard
HCN Co-Chair



Marie Casey
HCN Co-Chair



Date 16/02/2015

Copies To:

Leader: Cllr J. Birch

Director of Corporate Resources: Neil Dart

Unions Response to Draft Budget & Corporate Plan 2015/16 – 2017/18

As with past responses, we begin by stating that Unison nationally and locally is disappointed by the continued financial cuts in the public sector. This has and will continue to have a very damaging effect on staff and services to the community.

The budget setting process is a difficult time for all concerned. Every member of Hastings Borough Council is aware that there are difficult decisions to be made at all levels. We are hopeful that every effort will be made to minimise staff losses and that voluntary redundancy will be used to the fullest extent, thereby saving as many jobs as possible.

Again, Unison is very disappointed that there has been no strong evidence of planning for the maintenance of service levels. When workload has been addressed responses have been very vague. Clear information on what work is diminishing commensurate with staff reduction is not evident.

It is also clear that work from deleted posts is to be absorbed by remaining staff. We do not feel that Members in particular, understand the pressure that continues to mount on remaining staff. The phrase that is often used is 'Hastings punches well above its weight'. We feel the time has come to address just how realistic this is and how these expectations are affecting staff.

We are concerned that cuts to the training budget will not allow for succession planning when we lose experienced staff. As we discussed with the Critical Friend, we do not feel that a long term plan is in place and we move from one budget to the next with no overall long-term view for the organisation.

Concern has been expressed for colleagues expected to continue the work. This naturally has an impact on the health and wellbeing of staff. Unison understands the changes to the Occupational Health service should not disadvantage staff that need to use the service.

Yours Sincerely

Irene O'Mara

Chair Unison Hastings LG